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Mapping Cultural Representations and Practices in Tagore's *Chokher Bali*

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Abstract

The following paper entails a socio-political study of Rabindranath Tagore's *Choker Bali* (1903). The text is analysed through the lens of 'Cultural Studies', to examine the impact of culture, society, and politics on interpersonal relationships, moral fabric of the society and on the position of women in the society. A key inquisition within this paper is how culture is 'formed', how values are 'created', and how both are regulated by elements such as power, gender, and social institutions. It is also analysed how the author throws light on the socio-cultural mise-en-scène rather poignantly in the novel and how culture without the text (societal) regulates the culture within (textual). The research also seeks to establish how these socio-cultural factors direct and influence the author's representation of the characters, their moral choices, and demeanour. A cultural analysis of the novel will be attempted as a medium to understand key ideas pertaining to representation, gender roles and social institutions within the text, which in turn also showcase the colonial period in the history of India.

Keywords: Cultural studies, power, representation, gender, patriarchy, moral choices

1. Introduction

Chokher Bali (1903) was originally written in Bengali by legendary poet, playwright and author, Rabindranath Tagore. Published at the onset of the 20th century, the novel is set possibly around the 1860s. The work unravels interpersonal relationships among the three primary characters; Mahendra, Binodini and Ashalata, thereby exploring cultural milieu and social practices in the colonial period of India. The focus is especially on issues of widows, education, women's position in the society, patriarchal privileges enjoyed by men and the social, religious practices of Bengal. The novel highlights the consequences of changing cultural scenarios on facets of individual consciousness which is reined in by the moral fabric of society. Tagore deftly captures the conflict between tradition and modernity, progressive thought, and orthodox beliefs. The title literally translates into "sand in the eye" or "eyesore", and the work has exhibited abiding influence till date in academic, literary as well as performative pursuits, with several filmmakers, such as Satu Sen in 1938 and Rituparno Ghosh in 2003, making their respective cinematic adaptations of the work.

Tagore comes across as an author who was far ahead of his times in his representation of the psychology of the characters. He explores their consciousness, sexual desires, repression, and spiritual anxiety driven by the moral structure of the society. Psychological delineation of the leading characters takes precedence over the traditional primacy given to plot construction. Tagore probes into the psycho-

fragmentation functioning within the schema of the man/woman and the individual/society dynamics and explores the layers within institutions such as marriage, how they are regulated by elements such as power, education, religion, and gender. He explores the psyche of his characters, primarily Binodini, her sexual repression, inner conflicts as well as her modernity which she acquired through education. Chakraborty (2022) cites Tagore from his Preface to the second edition of *Chokher Bali*. She quotes the author, "The literature of the new age seeks not to narrate a sequence of events, but to reveal the secrets of the heart ...Such is the narrative of *Chokher Bali*." (p. 243). Chakraborty perceives it to be a novel of the "new age" (p.243), she also observes that "Tagore's nuanced writing also carries overtones of the nineteenth-century European novel." (Chakravorty, 2012; Ed. Arun Gupto) ^[19]. Tagore's exposure to education of the West as well as his in-depth understanding of the Indian philosophy leans to his writing a wide spectrum which spans from elements of realism coloured with the shades of the subconscious and the psyche.

2. *Chokher Bali*-A Brief Overview

The novel *Chokher Bali* explores the marriage of Mahendra and Ashalata, which is offset with the arrival of Binodini, a young widow. Binodini's coming creates tensions and unexplainable emotions in the heart of Mahendra, who oscillates between his feelings for Asha, his lawfully wedded wife, and Binodini. Binodini too dithers between her longing

for sexual intimacy and her reality of being a widow. She, however, finds respect and love in Bihari's (a close friend of Mahendra) treatment of herself, which then changes the course of events. After various episodes of Mahendra and Binodini's illicit relationship and Binodini's rejection of Bihari's marriage proposal, the novel ends with Asha having to accept her husband and Binodini going away.

The work entails social issues such as widow remarriage, female literacy, gender performativity, gender roles, patriarchy, female sexuality, etc. It is interesting to see how Tagore foregrounds the narrative in the backdrop of colonial India, which was a time of social reforms, a time when western education had become popular, speaking English language was not uncommon among Indians, and progressive social reforms pertaining to caste and gender were underway. I have undertaken a cultural analysis of the novel, and have attempted to analyse the text using the theoretical framework of Cultural Studies, and its guiding principles.

3. Culture and Cultural Studies

Culture, according to Oxford Dictionary, is a coherent set of values, beliefs, customs, traditions, arts, and ways of life of a particular group or society. Culture thus, in layman terminology, is the way a society is organized within a compact whole. However, within the scope and paradigm of cultural studies, culture is 'created', 'mutable', and 'transitive'. It disperses out of the collision between material and ideological redundancies, which function together as apparatuses towards the formation of a cultural identity. Culture, when looked through the lens of cultural studies, constitutes elements such as language, power, hegemony, control, economy, identity, race, religion, faith, politics, etc. It becomes a field of pragmatic as well as symbolic interplay of 'abstraction' and 'materiality', entailing concepts such as 'corporeality' and 'discursivity', blurring the lines between textuality, virtuality, and reality. (Parui, 2018) It is characteristic of a society's/group's tendency to resonate with a singular structure, both on normative as well as psychological levels. This culture is 'created' primarily along the lines of power and control, roles and obligations. Culture regulates individual consciousness, which in turn feeds into the largely societal one; the latter always aiming for hierarchy and dominance to be maintained within its structure for a smoother functioning of its assumed functionalities. Cultural studies therefore comprise of a multitude of discourses as well as practices, such as pedagogy, theory, interpretation, activism, criticism, and art. (Rodman, 2017) [7] "Cultural studies recognizes that the relationships that essentialism tries to explain are historical, rather than natural." (Rodman, 2017) [7] This means that relationships are matters of active construction and reconstruction, the latter involving the process of 'articulation', explained further in the subsequent section.

Cultural studies began around the years 1968-79, with some of the prominent approaches operating within it being:- Cultural Materialism, Marxism, Poststructuralism, Women's studies, Psychoanalytic studies, Linguistics, Semiotics, Capitalism, Consumption, Class, Gender, Power, Hierarchy, Epistemology, Ontology, Temporality, Ethnic studies, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Deconstruction, Social and Political theory, Literary theory, Philosophy, Media theory, History, Film studies, Political economy, Translation studies, Anthropology, New Historicism, etc. These approaches remain politically meshed; they attest to the hypothesis that the world functions on the basis of structures having an

interdependency and correlation amidst them. As a field, cultural studies do not have a fixed format or methodology, they are rather termed to be "an interlocking set of leftist intellectual and political practices." (Rodman, 2017) [7] Cultural studies is rooted both in the humanities as well as the social sciences. It discusses the relative discursive reality of science and knowledge and decodes the grounds of meanings, cultural symbols, and norms, i.e., how they are generated, distributed, and affiliated with systems of hegemony, power, and control. Cultural studies argue that culture has a physical quality and is produced; economical structures exert ascendancy over cultural meanings and phenomenon; agency, too, remains a pressing issue debated within this spectrum. A broad lens with which one may comprehend the vastness of this discipline is by assessing the immensity of the following domains:

- Marxism
- Gender studies
- Psychology
- Affect studies
- Memory studies (Parui, 2018)

a) Prominent Thinkers and their Contributions

Since its inception, a variety of thinkers have added their own perspectives and theorisations. Discussing their contributions allows us an idea of the way the concerned text shall be studied. Beginning with the pioneer in this aspect, we discuss Stuart Hall, who functioned as the director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hall gave two primary ideas-'articulation' and 'representation'. Articulation, according to Hall, is the manner in which different cultural and social phenomenon are interlinked with each other, for instance, articulation or 'putting together' of gender and nation, by which way we recognize a nation as female. Stuart Hall explicates articulation further through his example of a lorry and its front cab and back trailer:

The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. (Hall, 1986, p. 53)

Representation is another idea of Hall; he says that culture has a central role in this representation. How people, ideas and groups are represented depends upon the culture from which they originate. History thus is regulated by this cultural representation. The linkage via articulation links two distinct aspects within a single social formation, thus allowing for this linkage to be broken in need of disintegrating the constituting elements; society and the meanings it creates are then challenged due to this occurring. This iterates that meaning is 'generated' by culture; meaning therefore is elusive, as claimed by Derrida; it is ever changing. Meaning cannot be fixed (Hall). Hall thus says that a primal goal within cultural studies is to expose the artificiality of such meanings, to expose stereotypes.

Judith Butler, a prominent feminist thinker and critic, too pins down her viewpoints in relation to representation. Butler specifically points out that: 'recognition' becomes a problem for those who have been expelled from the structures and vocabularies of political representation. To Butler, there are schemes of recognition that determine who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition. She terms this 'differential distribution of recognizability'. (Willig, 2012) [24].

This means that representation has certain criterions which individual subjectivity must fit, so as not to face ostracizing from the domain of social acceptability. Prototypes and archetypes within cultures thus become markers of such a representation. Representations and meanings thus need to be challenged and modified in order to examine their origins; this leads to an active and positive move towards societal remodelling-an essential occurrence which resists the dictatorship of one central culture. Butler also gave the concept of 'gender performativity' in the first chapter of her 1990 work, *Gender Trouble*. We see the occurrence of this performativity in the ensuing analysis of the novel as well. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (p. 43-44) "gender proves to be performance-that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (Butler, 1990, p. 33)

Another prominent thinker is Karl Marx. Marx was a revolutionary economist, who explicated in his works-such as the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867)-the incessant interplay between economy, power, class division and social structures. His concept of the 'base' and 'superstructure' revolves around the effect of society on culture and vice versa. Marx says that the base involves the means of production, such as factories, machines, resources, etc. It is constituted of the relationship between the proletariat (the working class) and the bourgeoisie (the middle class). This base, Marx argues, is in fact the main entity which controls the superstructure-the superstructure being integrands such as ideology, law, media, politics, education, art, family, literature, culture, religion, faith, philosophy, etc. Cultural studies thus is a vast interdisciplinary amalgam of various discourses, where the examination of contemporary culture is done in order to locate its historical springboards. Cultural studies attempt to recontextualize culture by reconceiving it objectively, within the temporal frontiers of globalization and its affiliated power dynamics. How myth, literature, art, image, fantasy, medicine, genealogy, etc., are regulated in accordance with this dynamic is also a relative concern.

4. Tagore's *Chokher Bali*: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

a) Glimpses of Colonial History

As mentioned in *The Nation and Its Fragments* by Partha Chatterjee, "the domestic sphere depicted in *Chokher Bali* is a space crafted by the notions of colonial modernity and nationalism." (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 3) ^[21] Colonial Indian past is iterated with various reformative measures that aimed to remodel the society, primarily inspired by a desire to unite the masses as well as due to the influence of Western education. Reforms against 'sati', polygamy, child marriage, etc., were pervasive throughout. Land reforms and modernizing missions too were active measures. Destitute state of widows, nonetheless, was a crippling social reality. Young girls were married off to older men, half of the brides eventually widowed before reaching puberty. The passing of the Widow Remarriage Act in July 1856 changed the social landscape, with the first widow remarriage in India taking place in the month of December the same year; however, legislative measures could only bring a surface-level change in the social build. While literatures of the time accepted the nascent idea as a possible thematic subject, "the appeal is emotional; there

is no question of conceding what the reason demands." (Kapadia, 1957, p. 47) Sympathy lay more with the marriage of younger widows, an ulterior motive being the in-time confiscation of their sexual freedom. Women themselves regarded widowhood as a form of punishment they must endure. Specifically in Bengal, "it is said that a magazine, Yamuna by name, had to be discontinued because it published a story, *Charitrahina*, by Sarad Babu in which a widow was remarried..." (Kapadia, 1957, p. 48) Widow remarriage could not be accepted as a social ideal. This reality is evident in the chosen text, portrayed specifically via the character of Binodini. Binodini is "Bankim's Rohini, clearer, more elaborated, more developed. She is the precursor of Damini of Rabindranath, Abhaya and Kiranmayi of Saratchand." (Ray, 1961, p. 169) She is seen giving free rein to her desires, her needs, her emotional preoccupations. Her character is vital, vigorous, and robust:

If she could find no happiness, then whoever stood in her way to frustrate her, whoever was instrumental in depriving her from all that she deserved, whoever conspired to deny her what were her rightful dues, would be mercilessly crushed and humbled. Vengeance would be hers. (Tagore; trans. Sukhendu Ray, 2008; p. 126) ^[20]

Binodini thus represents this reality of widowhood, where a widow is fit enough to work and toil in a traditional household but not for marriage. The novel accounts how, even when a change was making its way slowly (represented by Bihari's marriage proposal to Binodini), chances of such a union taking place was always exponentially low, due to the social stigma attached with this occurrence.

Education is another socio-cultural reality presented in the novel. Colonialism brought Western education to the forefront, and by the time 1860s approached, it was being imparted to women as well. However, "female education depended to a great extent on the presence of a male mentor, usually the husband." (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 246). This we see in the tutoring of Ashalata by her husband Mahendra. This advent of female education was a by-product of the economic changes occurring during the colonial times, and a new middle class gradually emerged. This made the cost of living hefty, where women were now being seen as economically benefit able commodities. Any significant elevation in the state of women therefore never occurred single-handedly, as the changes majorly occurred in relation to the political and economic needs and requirements of the times.

Colonial reality also pertains to the onset of modern functionalities in the Indian psyche and its socio-cultural dynamic. In relation to this, Binodini in the text is the 'new woman', as termed by Soumi Mukherjee, and Tagore's humanism is chiefly reflected in Binodini's ardent control of her life. Her intent throughout is to secure a place for herself, perhaps to forge protection from the prospective harsh conditions of not having the security of a male figure. Politics of Bengal in the early 20th century was also situated around the Indian struggle of independence. Bengal was the threshold from which nationalist literatures and various revolutionary groups emerged; the Bengal Renaissance too was an important occurrence where unconventional perspectives were pursued. "Tagore's concept of 'modernity' thus stems from the traditional Indian essence of human integrity and attachment to challenge nineteenth century societal standards, distorted version of principles and conjugal bonding." (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 10) ^[21]

b) Social Mores

While Tagore has clearly revealed crucial historical details, he has also exposed the social realities attached with this history. He has represented the onset of education for women, but has also portrayed the harsh reality that this education was seen more of an advantage to marital prospects than an actual step towards empowerment. Binodini is the primary example of this. Moreover, we have seen how colonial Indian Bengal saw the emergence of a newer middle class during the years of economic outgrowth; this middle class inclined towards choosing vocations such as medicine, civil services, engineering, education, law, etc., which is what we see in the text as well. These vocations, too, were based on social mores and acceptance. Mahendra in the novel chooses medicine, Bihari studied engineering and also went for servitude by opening his own hospital. Bihari is portrayed as the “ideal anti-colonialist, nationalist medical student” (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 12) ^[21], the characters thus presenting an authentic image of the socio-cultural milieu. From the year 1875 until 1941, a lot of migrations occurred from the countryside to the city, primarily in search of newer occupations. (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 245) By 1911, “two-thirds of the urban population of Bengal lived in Kolkata and Howrah” (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 245). These aspects constituted the mobility of the upper class, “*Chokher Bali* presents an impressionistic image of Kolkata as a city in search of a modern lifestyle”. (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 245) For this budding class, “professional training is not a financial necessity”. (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 245)

Tagore represents the clash between the modern and the traditional through the character of Binodini. Discursivity is a hegemonic condition, and Binodini’s character is framed in retaliation to such discursivity. The character of Binodini represents Tagore’s modern outlook, his mirror-like reflection of a gradual but visible change in the society. Binodini is a woman of obduracy and resolve, “an arch plotter, torn with mental conflict and repression” (Bannerjee, in Chaudhuri 1988; p. 73) ^[6]. She is determined to assert her will over men, to pursue her desires, and to follow the heart. However, Binodini is not irrational or eccentric, on the contrary she has reason, diplomacy, and artfulness. She has been “denied her right to love, afire with jealousy, bent upon bringing Mahendra to his knees by all means” (Bannerjee, in Chaudhuri 1988, p. 73) ^[6]. Binodini is a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and intricately layered character, much against the status-quo of the times.

Tagore’s revolutionary approach is predominantly visible, and we can compare this portrayal with works written along similar lines by significant contemporaries of Tagore. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Bishabriksha*, published in 1873, holds a primal referential importance within the text, for it too reflects the state of widowhood within Bengali Hindu society. We see Stuart Hall’s idea of representation in the depiction of this social practice, where, as compared to Bankim Chandra’s rather conventional portrayal, “Tagore’s is a subtler, more convincing, psychological study than either of the two novels of Bankim which exploit a similar theme.” (Iyengar, 1984, p. 317) Chatterjee was known as ‘Sahitya Samrat’ or ‘Emperor of Literature’ in Bengali; he was the pioneer of Bengali novels. However, Chatterjee’s abovementioned work renders the widow in his text as a woman who too is torn by conflict and commits suicide, whereas Tagore’s Binodini is rendered free. Tagore rather explores the ‘humane’ aspect of widowhood, the desires of widows as well as their wishes. This is where Tagore rises above his contemporaries. His

trailblazing representation of widows denounces Chatterjee’s retrograde portrayal of widow remarriage. (Chandra, 1987).

The representation of the principal female characters in the novel, Ashalata, Binodini, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna offer an insight into the position of women, prospects of education and its associated empowerment, the social problem of widowhood and the perception of women being subordinate to men and male desire. “The three women Binodini, Asha and Rajlakshmi represent the evolving social and moral climate at the turn of the 20th century.” (Nasrin, 2022, p. 87) ^[13] In this regard we analyse Raymond Williams’ three primary demarcations of culture in his *The Long Revolution* (1961):

- Dominant
- Residual
- Emergent

Characters in *Chokher Bali* are embodiments of the above, where Binodini is the emergent culture (a modern rupture), functioning within a residual one (culture and traditions that persist despite changes in society and leadership), both battling against the dominant culture (agencies of power and control which regulate the societal functioning, in the novel represented by Mahendra’s patriarchal leverage).

There also is reflected in the novel three other primary struggles of the times:

- The individual versus social
- The traditional versus modern
- The colonial versus pre-colonial

We can trace these struggles quite categorically in the novel and see the cultural chaos exhibited throughout the text. Mahendra embodies the individual, always in pursuit of his own desires. The conflicts among Rajlakshmi, Ashalata, and Mahendra reflect the second-level listed altercation, where the onset of a modern culture (represented via Ashalata, her education, and empowerment) was threatening the traditional one’s (Rajlakshmi’s) existing power dynamics. What the novel thereby also explores is the hybrid and culturally complex scenario of the change which emerged in colonial India, i.e., introduction of conventionally non-prevalent or elite cultures, such as education of women, remarriage of widows, individualism, etc., and their apparent clashes with the more rooted and older cultures operating since the precolonial times. “The complex forces of tradition and modernity, Hindu orthodoxy and British liberalism create a strangely contradictory social milieu. New systems of knowledge jostle with the old...” (Chakraborty, 2012; Ed. Arun Gupto) ^[19] Moreover, the socio-cultural scenario, when studied from the lens of postcolonialism, reflects the idea of how in an already existing colonial set-up, patriarchy functioned as another colonizing institution, with women being doubly colonized. Culture in the novel thus becomes a complicated mesh of dependency (material needs supplied by the colonial system, i.e., the male patriarch) and interdependency (patriarchy and colonial systems both exploit and at the same time depend upon the systems they enslave).

c) Gender Roles

Tagore also offers a critique of gender roles, and Binodini is the primal representative of it. In the start of the novel, Binodini is a young widow, adept at household chores and able-bodied in all aspects. Towards the later chapters however, “She transforms into a blatantly sexual woman who has nothing to lose”. (Nasrin, 2022, p. 87) ^[13] Binodini

shatters the typical images associated with widowhood; she is bold and forward. She expresses her sexual desires and seeks its fulfilment, despite the imposed celibacy which was imposed on widows along with a life of total denial of any kind of physical and sensual experience. While she did pursue Mahendra and lead him on via signs and signals, she does not do so to extract something from him or depend on him alone. With Bihari she falls in love, however, she does not let her sexuality take control of her or her authentic self. Therefore, Binodini is the regulator of her desires; she represents all those women who have taken the control on their bodies back from society into their own hands. Renowned feminist critic and author Adrienne Rich “attempts to reconnect female thought and speech with the female body, with an intent to reclaim the body through verbalizing self-representation.” (Littman, Linda (2003) ^[11]). This becomes Binodini’s primal role in the novel.

Sexuality of widows is a threat to society’s institution of marriage and its piousness; marriage as an institution forms the foundational structure of a society. Its norms are created predominantly by those in charge of other subcultures, such as religion and faith. Marriage ensures control over a woman’s body and her sexual liberation; it reins in her liberation through the clutches of a male patriarch. Within it, the female body becomes an active site for politics and control. The female body is not her own but a “body-for-others”, as stated by Thapan in *Femininity and its Discontents: The women’s Body in Intimate Relations* (1997). Therefore, when studied from the angle of Marxist criticism, widow remarriage is a destabilizing peril to the capitalist one-dimensional ownership of the female, and through the ‘articulation’ of widow remarriage with a loosening of the societal structure and control, a culture is formed to exert tranquilizing control over such possibilities. Tagore destabilizes this cultural practice.

It is crucial here to note power relations operate through assertion of supremacy, which Gramsci describes as ‘consensual hegemony’. Marx too emphasized that society’s ruling class constructs the norms which in the novel is represented by Mahendra. Mahendra regulates materialism, and he represents a larger system of society where means of production (base) are largely or almost entirely controlled by men, hence they automatically come to control the production of culture (constituent by superstructure). Such a culture then forms or deforms identities by either accepting or rejecting them; this is done by breaking those identities down in the form of commodities. A commodity which then seems to aid material and economic gains therefore achieves a higher status. Women thus come out being a transferable piece of enterprise, and gender becomes a site of rule. This relativity can be understood via understanding the concept of cultural materialism. Cultural materialism argues that material reality of a society forms the basis of its infrastructure, i.e., economy, technology, demography, reproductivity, etc. This infrastructure influences and controls the structure, which is the kinship or the domestic system, as well as the superstructure, which contains fundamentals such as ideology, faith, culture, art, religion, symbols, and many other such elements as listed above.

Tagore thus represents how within the emerging politics of Bengal and a larger India, there functioned many miniature models of social mobility. Mahendra controls the cultural capital, comprising of the social assets of an individual in society, i.e., intellectual capabilities, education, speech and dressing, etc. He therefore has occupied cultural wealth by means of acquiring the three primary cultural capitals: the

embodied cultural capital (knowledge or skills), the objectified cultural capital (knowledge of values inherent within objects of culture, such as works of art), and the embodied cultural capital (degrees, qualifications, etc.) The attainment of the above three capitals, according to Pierre Bourdieu-the man who had first defined them-leads to the securing of social and economic capital.

When we return to female representation in the text, we see that the speciality within this work of Tagore’s lies both in its agreement to and rejection of the socio-cultural and normative ambient. Tagore explores the four primary archetypes within the boundaries of which the female consciousness as well as the female realities are circumscribed:

- The whore
- The wife
- The saint
- The villain

The treatment meted out to Binodini’s character towards the end of the novel represents how the then society viewed even the prospect of widows engaging in new intimate relationships, often rendering these women close to the first category. Tagore also explores, in contrast to Binodini, the character of Ashalata. Asha represents the second prototype-the manifestation of the ‘ideal wife’, who welcomes the misfortunes, misdemeanours, and misconducts laid upon her by her husband, all in the name of marital imperatives and its presumed set of hierarchies as well as the attached gender performativity (Butler, 1990). Asha’s character represents the universally meek, docile, obeying, and submissive archetype laid upon women as the only acceptable status quo. “I will not be able to survive if he rejects me.” (p. 166) are Asha’s words in the novel, coupled with instances where Mahendra’s indifference becomes an obloquy to her, and she wonders “What prevented Mahendra to come out in the open and punish her?” (p. 172). Tagore has portrayed the institution of marriage, he has critiqued the stereotyped gender roles ascribed to men and women, and by allowing Binodini to fulfil her bodily desires without allowing the men to become the agents of her destiny, he has presented the woman not as a meek, dependent being but as a person who is in control of her life, choices and fate.

d) Moral Fabric

The moral fabric within the text is an extension of the social and cultural practices which were preeminent in the Bengali culture at that time. The treatment of Mahendra’s illicit relationship with Binodini is a primal example of this. It represents the way cultures and values are regulated by aspects such as gender and power. While Mahendra’s affair goes overlooked and more so without any retribution, Binodini on the other hand is socially ridiculed and morally ostracized. Mahendra is the only scion and the sole future patriarch within his socially well-off family, and as we examine culture as an entanglement of base and superstructure, we decode how Mahendra’s positional upper hand somewhere or the other dictates the cultural scenarios within his household. Therefore, the hold of morality too is dictated by power and authority.

Asha’s morality is shaped and expressed via her submissive language; language becomes a part of the conforming and legitimizing process through which a human subject becomes subversive to dominant discourses. This language leads to the formation of a ‘cultural model’ through which majority of the women, as well as Binodini herself, will be judged against:

Dearest, is it my crime that you loved me? Did I ever dream of such good fortune smiling on me? What was I? A mere nobody. I came from nowhere. Would I have ever faulted you even if you never looked at me, even if I were just an unpaid slave in your home? No, I never could. I cannot in the least fathom what attracted me to you that you enriched my life so much with your abundant love. Now that, out of a clear sky, a thunderbolt has struck me, why did it merely singe me and not reduce me to cinders? (Tagore; trans. Sukhendu Ray, 2008; p. 96-97)^[20]

It is certainly not so that Tagore has just simply portrayed the stereotypes, for in his multidimensional character of Binodini, he has created a cultural rebellion. He shows the linkage between the 'cultural', the 'social', and the 'domestic'. Tagore shows how Binodini's education becomes the chief component of her modern build; she is a reader, a skilled writer. Education thus expanded Binodini's mind, and her actions signify rational thought, liberty, and a freedom to pursue what she desires. Education thus allowed Binodini to question the cultural and epistemological model of traditional widowhood. Moreover, education is seen the main component that changes Asha too. She emerges a woman of a newly acquired consciousness, proliferated by the dynamics of her pervasive education. These elements in the novel are true embodiment of the Bengal Renaissance. Tagore says of Asha: She recalled her aunt's sermons, the dictum of the scriptures, the legends of the *puranas*-but they meant nothing to her now. She found it difficult to put Mahendra on a pedestal as her sole and venerable deity. All that she had cherished so long she sacrificed this evening at the altar of Binodini's infamy. Everything around her-this loveless evening, the silence of the stars, in her bloodstream, the lonely roof, the conjugal bed now forsaken-tolled the knell of her love. Binodini's Mahendra was now a stranger as far as she was concerned. No way could she go into that room. (Tagore; trans. Sukhendu Ray, 2008; p. 224-225)^[20]

However, as the plot progresses, we see the moral fabric of the society regulating the way the author ends the story. We see Binodini's dynamic character transforming into a rather gentle and submissive build. This change could just be a result of the developing endearment between Bihari and Binodini, and it could very well reflect how love, as a culturally and philosophically rendered pious and 'saviour' discourse, was perceived as an important cultural fragment unifying or transforming people (as was seen in cinema, literature, folk tales, etc.). But it could also be Tagore's way of representing the idea that marriage has become a transaction and only love could be the human soul's sustenance. Nonetheless, this metamorphosis could very well be a result of the author's intrinsic or pressured obligation to comply with the existing cultural construct, where female characters, no matter how ardent, headstrong, or independent they were at first, had to concur and come round to a more acceptable and socially agreeable build. Perhaps it is a commentary on the tragedy of how individual liberty will always remain subordinate to cultural atmosphere. In the end, one cannot survive without being affiliated with a group, for as human beings, we have a primal need to belong. Binodini realised this need as the very basis of her survival. At last she needed to belong; unfortunately, she could never be just Binodini but always a 'widow'-a label society has forced upon her. She starts out as herself, but takes on the likeness of what Asha had represented all along. This newly transformed Binodini now spoke, "I will pray hard to have you for my

own in my next life. I have suffered much, I have made you suffer much, and now I have learnt my lesson." (p. 278)

The ending of the novel is thus crucial. Asha, even after she undergoes a realisation, nonetheless must accept an unfaithful husband, with Binodini on the other hand appropriating a sudden saint-like aura and resorting to exile. The social environs of which these women were a part of did not allow them any other choice. Therefore, Tagore either aptly represents the early 20th century Bengal, and in reality the whole of Indian subcontinent, where fates of most women lay in servitude despite their inner resolve and alacrity, or he himself functioned as a non-deliberate vehicle in the procession of the same social dialogue with which he inwardly did not agree with. Even after receiving the offer of marriage with Bihari Binodini chooses to remain unmarried. This is either Tagore's final blow towards shattering the expected status quo or it was a realistic end to a revolutionary piece of work. Nonetheless, the moral fabric of the text needed to be maintained, and the author does so either having felt a dire necessity for having to comply with the normative structure of which he too is a part or to fulfil his role as a writer to present things truthfully.

5. Conclusion

The microcosm of a given literary text reflects the macrocosm of the social order, time, and place within which an author situates the characters. It is an unmistakable extension of the external world, through which the reader can deduce significant customs, beliefs and even derive information regarding historical developments and movements. Cultural studies serves as an apt theoretical framework for such a study. Through a cultural analysis of *Chokher Bali*, I have tried to show how the socio-cultural settings of the times exhibited firm control over various elements within the novel, primarily representation of characters, interpersonal relationships and institutions such as marriage.

In the above enquiry it was observed that culture as a force regulated a vast set of components within everyday life, such as the way people exhibit control, the manner in which values are formed and then thereafter deconstructed, and also the way hierarchy is established in society. This culture is in turn regulated by two primary forces-economy and politics.

Cultures are formed to serve a particular section of the concerned society. This very culture, on the other end of the spectrum, ostracises other people's or group's interests. This protection and ostracism function as the continued cultural chaos, necessary for a healthy functioning of the dominating culture's interests. Where socio-cultural scenarios of everyday instances are largely influenced by culture, this culture itself is regulated by forces that extract power from it. Overthrowing of preexisting cultures then becomes an important task, which leads to the formation of newer ones: a necessary step for societal evolution.

The novel thus explores crucial issues, such as widow remarriage, extramarital affairs, patriarchy, sexism, gender roles and performativity, etc. It explores the manual nature of cultures and the superficiality of their attached values. Through the medium of cultural studies, it is analysed how values too remain transitive in nature, malleable and affected by components such as gender and power. It is thus significantly decoded that culture is a 'created' force-an interplay of power, control, and hegemony. Characters in the novel thus become active players within this interplay, as seen in actual life. Solely Binodini seems to escape this pungent cycle towards the very end. Throughout the text, she seemed

to wish for nothing but respect and an identity devoid of labels, which she seems to procure as the story comes to a closure. However, whether Binodini is a victim of the societal limitations imposed upon her-in her rejection of the marriage proposal-or whether it was her last and salient step towards self-proclamation is a matter left ambiguous and up to the reader's interpretation by the author.

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